

**To:** Allgeier, Steve[Allgeier.Steve@epa.gov]; Travers, David[Travers.David@epa.gov]; Grevatt, Peter[Grevatt.Peter@epa.gov]; Burneson, Eric[Burneson.Eric@epa.gov]  
**From:** David Travers  
**Sent:** Mon 2/10/2014 3:20:48 AM  
**Subject:** NYT article WV spill

Weeks after health authorities had told West Virginians that their water was safe to drink again following a toxic spill, schools in Charleston sent students home abruptly last week when students and staff members detected the telltale licorice odor of the leaked chemical.

Officials have repeatedly backtracked since [lifting a tap-water ban](#) about a week after [the Jan. 9 spill](#), first advising pregnant women not to drink the water and then resuming the distribution of bottled water.

Around Charleston, the capital, restaurants advertise that they cook only with bottled water.

What began as a public health emergency after chemicals contaminated the drinking water of 300,000 people has spiraled into a crisis of confidence in state and federal authorities, as residents complain of confusing messages and say they do not trust experts. The spill continues to arouse fear and outrage, and it threatens a political crisis in a state where lawmakers have long supported the coal and chemical industries.

Joe Merchant, a meteorologist at the National Weather Service who moved to the area two years ago, said Gov. Earl Ray Tomblin's administration and federal health officials had "refused to communicate uncertainty, and completely lost credibility with the people here."

There have been emotional public hearings and town hall meetings, some with the environmental activist Erin Brockovich. Some 50 residents complained to the State Legislature last week about the Tomblin administration and demanded that lawmakers pass a tough bill regulating chemical storage tanks to help prevent future spills.

The governor said he was frustrated, too. "I share your concerns about the water crisis," he said at a news conference on Wednesday. "I heard you, and I am listening."

Mr. Tomblin was flanked by officials from the federal Environmental Protection Agency and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, who made their first public appearance in the state nearly a month after 10,000 gallons of MCHM, or 4-methylcyclohexane methanol — an industrial chemical used in coal processing — seeped from a ruptured tank into the Elk River.

The federal officials offered assurances about the safety of the water. "You can drink it," said Dr. Tanja Popovic of the C.D.C. "You can bathe in it."

But that same day, two schools in Kanawha County, which includes Charleston, sent students home after the chemical's odor was detected. A teacher at Riverside High School who fainted and a student with burning eyes were taken to the hospital, a spokeswoman for the State Education Department said. On Thursday, three more schools closed.

The Education Department spokeswoman, Liza Cordeiro, said that water tests at the schools conducted by the National Guard did not detect MCHM at a concentration of 10 parts per billion, a threshold 100 times stricter than the level the C.D.C. has determined to be safe for use.

But residents have come to trust their noses over such tests.

"If one smells the odor, people know the chemical is in the water," said Dr. Rahul Gupta, director of the Kanawha-Charleston Health Department. "It's difficult for a lot of people to drink it even if they agree with the science behind it."

Like many others, Dr. Gupta said he was not drinking the water. He has called for long-term studies of the chemical's effects on public health and said the official response had become "a case study of what not to do in order to manage a crisis well."

The authorities have sent mixed messages, Dr. Gupta and others said. Estimates of the volume of MCHM that leaked have been steadily revised upward. A second chemical was [discovered to have leaked](#) as well. Dr. Popovic of the C.D.C. said the advisory that pregnant women not consume the water was issued to "empower" them. And after the governor said last week that it was not feasible to test the water in individual homes, he reversed himself and said officials would consider doing so.

"I don't know that I've seen a crisis of confidence as I've seen with this water crisis," Tim Armstead, the minority leader and

ranking Republican in the House of Delegates, told reporters.

With the Legislature midway through its annual session in Charleston, water quality issues have dominated discussion. Environmentalists, used to losing most battles in the state, are cautiously optimistic.

“I don’t believe they want to leave this session with the public thinking they haven’t done enough,” said Don Garvin, the chief lobbyist for the West Virginia Environmental Council. His group is pushing for a registry of chemical storage tanks and for inspections by engineers who are independent of industry and the State Environmental Protection Department, which has often been a lax watchdog.

Marybeth Beller, a political scientist at Marshall University in Huntington, W.Va., said, “Typical regulatory legislation in West Virginia looks good for a headline, but when you read through it, there are all these loopholes.” But this time, she said, there is “sustained outrage” because the spill occurred in the state’s largest city during an election year.

“I don’t think we’re going to have too many people running in 2014 in West Virginia who are going to be talking about anti-regulation,” Dr. Beller said.

The authorities have not been able to say how long the odor and taste of the chemical will linger, or to reassure residents about long-term health effects.

“We are one month into the disaster and our water, like the water of thousands of others in our area, still smells of MCHM,” said Jeff Haynes, who lives less than a mile from the Elk River.

Mr. Haynes and his wife do not trust the tap water for drinking, cooking or cleaning. “Showers are very few and far between,” he said. “Meal prep and cleanup is a lot like urban camping and requires a lot of patience.”

His wife has an autoimmune disease, so they try to be especially careful. “This situation has, to say the least, caused more undue stress to our already stressful situation,” Mr. Haynes said.

Sent from my iPad